

INDICATORS OF PHYSICAL VIOLENCE IN HOME

It can be difficult to ask women whom you suspect are abused if they are in fact being abused. Sometimes the woman will resist inquiries, sometimes she will welcome the opportunity to discuss what is happening to her. The important thing to convey to her is that you do care about what is happening. Here are some suggestions for interviewing women who are willing to talk about the violence. Even if the woman won't talk about the violence, be sure you convey to her that you are there to assist her and give her referral information about local battered women's resources.

NOTE: The United States Department of Justice findings are that 95% of domestic violence is perpetrated against women by husbands, former husbands, or boyfriends, although it is recognized that both men and women are victims of domestic violence. For purposes of these guidelines, women are referred to as the victim of domestic violence.

- Interview each potential victim separately. Do not interview in presence of possible assailant. Do not ask abuser to verify the victim's story.
- Do a history of violence for each possible victim in the family.
- What does the abuser do to the victim?
- Has it gotten worse?
- Has it changed?
- Begin by asking general questions about the relationship and about control and conflict.
- Ask directly about physical violence. "Is anyone hitting you?"
- "How do you handle anger in your family?"
- "Has your husband ever threatened to hit you?"
- "Has he ever done anything to the furniture or your belongings?"
- "Are you being coerced into doing things that are unpleasant or uncomfortable for you?"
- Assess for injuries. Sometimes these are hidden and minimized. Assess for medical needs. Sometimes medications are withheld from the woman by the abuser.

- Do an immediate safety assessment.
 - Are there weapons in the house?
 - Who has been threatened with weapons?
 - What threats, physical and emotional, have been made?
 - Has the violence grown more frequent and severe?
- Ask questions like, "In what way can I be helpful to you?" "What do you want to do?" Listen carefully for the woman's crisis request and try to respond to it, or if you cannot respond, offer your help in obtaining resources that will. If you cannot give her what she is asking for, be honest, and try to respond to at least a part of her request.
- Ensure that she is aware of her shelter, legal, and financial options. Know her rights and resources or if you do not, call someone or refer her immediately to someone who does. Talk out with her the consequences of her choices. What will he do? How can she protect herself?
- Help her mobilize resources and her support system, if it will be safe.
- Validate her feelings.
- Acknowledge her strengths, specific ways she has protected herself or her children, methods she used to leave the abuse or to maintain sanity, the courage she demonstrates by telling you about the violence or by calling for help. However, do not negate her intense feelings of fear and vulnerability by focusing solely on her strengths. This would minimize the range of feelings she is experiencing and make her feel foolish.
- Do not blame her for the abuse. Do not ask questions that imply victim-blaming. Victim-blaming questions include, "Why are you staying with a man like that?" "Do you get something out of the violence?" "What did you do at that moment that led him to hit you?"

In order to successfully intervene with battered women, the following are important:

- Professionals must understand the dynamics of battering.
- Professionals must recognize that the woman needs information but that she must be seen as the expert on her situation.
- It is the role of the Children's Service Worker to be supportive and respectful no matter what decision the battered woman makes. This does not mean that when

the children are at risk, intervention should not be done (she can choose things we don't like).

- Professionals are responsible to be aware of resources in the community to help the battered woman.
- Professionals must clearly know that no matter what the circumstances are, the battering is always the responsibility of the abuser, not the victim.
- If you are considering removal of the child(ren), do not bully her with that fact. Do not make angry statements like, "Choose between your partner or your child." Rather, be honest and explain the options and their consequences if she chooses to stay and the child is at risk. Empathize with her by statements like, "It must be terribly hard to choose between your child and your husband." It is important that she has time to talk through her options and make choices. If the child is removed, the agency should allow her input into the planning process so that she keeps as much control as possible.
- If a woman is battered, regardless of who the batterer is, she and her children are entitled to help, referrals, safety and support.
- Experience suggests that the more power a woman has, the more ability she has to protect her children. Court orders, support groups and sanctions against the abuser give her power. One way to give the mother power is to help her gain access to those power-generating options. The child, obviously, will not be safe unless the mother is safe.
- Do not coerce a battered woman into testifying against her partner in a child abuse case. Urge her to appear in court but remember that if he threatens her, she may be in grave danger and she should not be forced to testify. There may be other ways of gathering evidence against the abuser.
- For women in some cultural groups, it is extremely difficult and sometimes impossible to leave an abusive partner. For example, some Hispanic and Chinese women never leave their immediate community. If they did, ostracism and community and family censure would be extremely strong and their survival would be endangered. Going to a shelter or to court may not be alternatives. It is critical, therefore, that services be provided by those who are sensitized to these issues and that referrals be made to programs that have explored racism, have received multi-cultural training, and that have hired a culturally diverse staff. It is particularly important that women not be punished for the lack of culturally relevant services and resources. It is equally important that we work respectfully with those community agencies, like the church, that many women turn to for help to work out safety plans.

- Workers must be aware of culturally biased assessments of neglect. For example, in some cultures older siblings are taught and encouraged to take care of younger ones without the presence of adults; extended networks frequently care for children when the mothers are working, seeking help, or are temporarily incapacitated.
- Be particularly sensitive to the difficulties experienced by rural women, including isolation, lack of transportation, jobs, and housing; lack of privacy, i.e., the whole community will find out if she calls the police; her fear of living in a shelter in town; lack of legal and medical services; lack of safe spaces where she can flee; rejection by her family and friends for telling about the violence or incest.

Adapted from the New Hampshire Coalition Against Domestic & Sexual Violence curriculum, "Understanding Domestic Violence."

MEMORANDA HISTORY: